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Access in Education: Assisting Students from Dependence to Independence

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We have a responsibility that goes beyond helping disabled students to receive services and to perform academically. We have a responsibility to assist them in the development of their own independence, to "empower" them, to use the current popular terminology. Individual empowerment is essential in regard to the recent passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which makes discrimination against disabled persons illegal. More doors, more opportunities will be opening up for qualified disabled individuals. However, the ADA is not an affirmative action mandate. Empowered students will need the ability and skills to push through the accessible doors and speak out to receive the accommodations they require.

The authors of this article wish to encourage our fellow AHSSPPE members to make a commitment to promote student independence as an essential aspect of their jobs. This article comes as a result of our concerns. Dale Brown, who works at the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, is concerned because of complaints from many employers that students who enter the work world expect unreasonable accommodations and extreme amounts of praise, or expect that substandard work is acceptable. Anthony Tusler and Bill Clopton of Sonoma State University are concerned because they see disabled students who are academically qualified being treated as dependent children. They see students being allowed to continue this dependent role while requesting services. If students are to develop realistic expectations about the work world and the skills to succeed in this world, they need to be exposed to a system that promotes their independence and self-advocacy skills. This involved developing skills specifically in social interaction, decision making, and problem solving.

Premises

When working to promote independence there are several premises that underlie our actions: (1) Discrimination in schools and universities will not be tolerated. (2) Students must be academically "otherwise qualified." (3) Students initiate requests for services. (4) Students will eventually graduate. (5) Students are active participants in all DSS service

provision. (6) Students take responsibility for their share of the outcome. (7) The DSS professional share his/her knowledge, control, and information with the student. (8) Students are met at their current level of independence and supported in expanding their skills.

Two Models of Service Delivery

Two potential models of service delivery will be described. The first is based on the “Social Pathology Model” of Gliedman and Roth; we have named it the “Traditional Service Delivery Model.” It does little to promote independence. In fact, this model promotes dependence, while masquerading as the best way to take care of the problem. The second model, The Student Development Model, may look more awkward on the surface, but it has as its goal the development of student skills and independence. This is based on a body of work developed over the past thirty years on development models for adult learners. The key concepts were described by W. G. Perry, Jr. and A. W. Chickering.

In the Traditional Service Delivery Model the professional is seen as the expert who retains exclusive rights to knowledge, control, and decision-making. She or he acts as a liaison on the student’s behalf and assumes the responsibility for meeting the student’s needs. The student remains the passive recipient of services with the goal being to keep the student dependent on the system but happy.

In this model the student approaches the professional in an inferior posturing position which says in effect, “Please take pity on me and help me with your knowledge and power.” The professional is seen as the only one who can solve the problem. In the role of helper and expert, the professional passes out wisdom, makes phone calls, fills out forms, and in various ways does everything to take care of it.

When the students receive the desired service they are filled with relief and gratitude that the professional has been able to resolve the dilemma. This frees the students from having to deal with difficult issues they will be required to face later in life.

Interestingly enough, most people visualize the helper as an able-bodied person being charitable towards the student with a disability. As people with disabilities, the authors would like to point out that people with disabilities can fall into the rescuing trap as well. We have found that we feel ever-so-expert in how we overcame our disabilities. Proudly we enjoy advising the student on what they should do. And, of course, it is easier at times to do it ourselves. We find it difficult to overcome this internalized tendency to help. After all it was the desire to help that led us into the helping professions.

Nevertheless, we have found that we must overcome the desire to help in order to be truly helpful. We must be able to do less to become a facilitator rather than a rescuer. To do this we advocate using the Student Development Model.

In the Student Development Model the professional is seen as a facilitator who shares knowledge, control, and decision making skills with the students. The students are supported in gaining the skills to become their own advocates and liaison with the system (professors and departments) to obtain services and accommodations. The students are active participants in the delivery of services. The goal is to empower students to be independent and responsible for making things happen. In this way students become appropriately interdependent.

This means that the student can effectively network within a system and society at large to be a fully active and participating member of society. Students are able to do this because they have gained knowledge, experience, and self-confidence. The goal is not necessarily to keep the students happy but to facilitate their involvement in the process. In this model the student seeks to find an equal participant in the process of gaining information, making decisions and carrying out functions necessary to achieve a desired goal. The professional is seen as a resource for sharing specialized information and the how-to methods of getting things done in a system. The student approaches the professional from an equal position which says in effect, "Share your knowledge and expertise with me so that I will be able to develop the skills I need to function more independently."

How Do We Use the Student Development Model?

Now that we have described the advantages to the Student Development Model, how do we put it into practice? We feel that simply maintaining an awareness of the Student Development philosophy will put you on the right track. You will begin to see ways to alter the service delivery process to promote student participation. We recognize that students are at different points in their development and so we need to have strong goals but also means to move students towards them. So, we have included a transition phase to help teach student how to become more appropriately interdependent. We tell the students that they are the experts in deciding what accommodations they need and how to acquire them.

Traditional Service Delivery Model

	Student	DSS Staff
1. Identify self to Disability Office		X
2. Determine student's needs		X
3. Determine accommodations		X
4. Assist student to develop independence skills		X
5. Inform professor of student's disability		X
6. Negotiate accommodation methods		X
7. Make specific arrangements for accommodations		X
8. Participate in the service delivery process as requested	X	X
9. Take responsibility for the process to be implemented		X

and run smoothly

Proposed Student Development Models

Transition Phase

1. Identify self to Disability Office	X	
2. Determine student's needs	X	X
3. Determine accommodations	X	X
4. Assist student to develop independence skills	X	X
5. Inform professor of student's disability	X	*
6. Negotiate accommodation methods	X	*
7. Make specific arrangements for accommodations	X	*
8. Participate in the service delivery process as requested	X	*
9. Take responsibility for the process to be implemented and run smoothly	X	X

Student Development Goal

1. Identify self to Disability Office	X	
2. Determine student's needs		X
3. Determine accommodations		X
4. Assist student to develop independence skills	X	*
5. Inform professor of student's disability	X	*
6. Negotiate accommodation methods	X	*
7. Make specific arrangements for accommodations	X	*
8. Participate in the service delivery process as requested	X	
9. Take responsibility for the process to be implemented and run smoothly	X	*

X person with primary responsibility

* person with support responsibility, as needed

In these charts we show how services have traditionally been offered and therefore created and abetted dependencies, a Transition Phase that shows how service providers can begin to share the responsibilities, and finally the goal of appropriately interdependent.

But do not expect things to always run smoothly. Remember that frustration is a necessary part of the learning experience, and that the students need to practice their developing skills. Students need to experience different situations to learn how to handle a variety of social interactions.

When you begin to use the Student Development Model with students we suggest that you start slowly and take it one step at a time. Remember that this is a process, and think of ways to involve and educate the students in the delivery of services. We need to realize that this process requires effort and risk-taking on the part of the student as well as the

professional. At times things will be somewhat messy, and you will need to support the students with feedback and encouragement as they go through the process. But the results will be worth it!

Students may resist the process at first until they experience some success and begin to gain confidence in their ability to make decisions and put plans into action. For years, many of these students have operated using a dependent role as their way of getting things done in the world. Now, suddenly, we are asking them to change their methods of operation, take risks, and participate in the service delivery process.

We know that students are individuals and are somewhere along a continuum of independence. So we need to maintain a balance between support and challenge while moving along this continuum. At times, the students will take two steps forward and then one step back. When this happens, we need to support the student in rethinking the situation and coming up with an alternative plan of action, or you may need to be more involved in the process to support the student.

Conclusions

We are very proud of the tremendous progress that disabled students and service providers have made over the years. We see improvements through empowerment and students becoming stronger. We see that many of our campuses are getting more resources. As we gain in resources and attention we must not lose the pioneering spirit. We must recognize our tendencies towards charity and discipline ourselves to provide only appropriate help while emphasizing student development. When this happens, students will enter the workforce not only qualified but ready to work.

For an excellent overview of student development theory see Delworth, Hanson, and Associates, *Student Services, A Handbook for the Profession, 2nd Edition*, 1989 San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

John Gliedman and William Roth, *The Unexpected Minority, Handicapped Children in America*, 1980, New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Janovich